

**DEATH AND SUICIDE
IN CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT
Group Chairman's Introduction**

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This year I received more letters and phone calls than last year, not to speak of the year before, urging me not to attend this conference. The people who wrote and phoned me seemed quite sure that they knew a great deal that I didn't know, but let that be. They clearly had no idea how the conference works, and perhaps some of you also don't know some of the things I am about to say. I'll be very brief about it.

I have enjoyed total freedom in choosing three speakers and three commentators. I also had a chance to modify the topic. What was originally suggested was "Death in Contemporary Religion and Philosophy," and I suggested making it "Contemporary Thought" and including suicide. We are not responsible for recent events that have focused attention on the problem of suicide. I hope they do not account for some of you having flocked to this session rather than others. The main reason for including suicide in our session is that death is being done to death these days. An editor who found fault with me in 1960 for devoting a whole chapter in a book to death, told me in the 1970s that what was needed was an anthology on death, because death was "in".

Now, actually, I had contributed to an anthology on death in the 1950s and the widespread notion that death was taboo and couldn't be discussed before the 1970s is, like so many things that everybody knows, false. It wasn't taboo in my generation, which lived through World War II, nor in my parents', which lived through World War I, nor has it ever been taboo in world literature; and when a playwright after World War II called a play "The Death of a Salesman" people didn't stay away. On the contrary, they flocked to it, and made it one of the most successful American plays ever.

Now it seemed to me that the time had come to focus more rational discussion on suicide, and in fact I had hoped originally that more of this

morning's discussion would deal with that. But it did seem desirable to make the discussion truly interdisciplinary, and international, and to get outstanding people to share their thoughts with us. Of course, they also enjoyed total freedom, with the result that they aren't saying what I thought they might say. It seems clear that all of this is rather typical of the conference as a whole, and it gives some of the sessions a certain degree of incoherence, which isn't anything to cry about.

Our speakers and commentators are not only from different disciplines, but also are, every one of them, exceptionally interdisciplinary people and people of very marked individuality. Before I introduce the first speaker, let me say something very briefly about the ground rules. I have been given ten minutes to introduce this session, but I'm trying to set a good example by staying way under that. The speakers each have up to fifteen minutes, but are under no obligation to actually use all that time, but will be cut off if they go very much over that. The commentators have up to five minutes, and people from the floor should, if possible, confine their remarks to something like one minute. I will not immediately cut them off after sixty seconds, but what we want is some lively interchange and not just a succession of papers and speeches. To facilitate that, there will be another session this evening, which will be perhaps a little more sparsely attended, and, therefore I hope a little more freewheeling.

The first speaker is Ninian Smart whose discipline strikes me as so important that I think every undergraduate should be required to study it—comparative religion. One of the problems with this curricular reform is that there are rather few professors who are really competent to teach it. Ninian Smart is one of the few and has an international reputation as an outstanding comparativist. I don't know whether he or for that matter anyone else who will speak here this morning believes in absolute values—believes that there are any, believes that there could be. I certainly don't, and I didn't ask the speakers if they did or not. But Ninian Smart and all of those who will follow him here are quite exceptionally well qualified to help us with the re-evaluation of existing values.